

The night manager, Ellis Leahy, dropped the pile of dollar bills he'd been counting and said, "Blood?"

Back out front, the manager of Burger 'N' Run #32 said to the manager of Burger 'N' Run #30, Vista's South Santa Fe Avenue store, "The girl's history." He was temporarily right. The district manager ordered night manager Leahy to fire the girl. Mr. Leahy sent the girl home and filled out the paperwork but, when the guys had gone, the termination form went into the trash can, and the night manager called Kim and told her to come back in to work the next day, that he was giving her a raise for, "Punching that shithead's lights out like I wish I had the balls to do."

Kim would have told him to get fucked, but she knew that without a job (no matter how shitty) she would sink into an inertia that might, over the long run, kill her, so she said, "O.K., boss; how much of a raise?"

ELLIS TAKES A BATH BEFORE HE EVEN GETS TO VEGAS

Ellis put his foot to the floor and blew through San Bernardino like it was standing still. He made the high desert by dusk, switched the Oldsmobile into cruise control on the arrow-straight freeway, leaned back, slid Duke Ellington's Indigos into the tape deck, draped his right arm across the seat top and said to no one, "Look out, Vegas, here I come."

He stopped in Victorville for gas and a burger and coke, then he lunged onto the freeway again. He'd planned on going non-stop from Victorville to Vegas, but ten miles outside the Nevada border his headlights caught — for just a second, a flash of white in the dark night — a naked woman on the side of the road. He braked the Olds to a stop as quickly as his seventy miles per hour would allow, then he backed the car up along the shoulder. He parked on the spot where he thought he'd seen her and walked ten yards into the dark desert. He didn't see her; he saw only the lunar hills and the bright stars above the horizon. When he turned to go back to the Olds, a small voice cried out, "Can you help me?" He turned around and peered into the darkness and said, "Where are you?" The voice answered, "Out here." He shuffled away from the freeway, dragging his feet and kicking small stones out in front of himself to scare off the snakes that were almost certainly lying about soaking the residual heat from the sun. He followed the sound of the voice into a shallow gully. He woke up two hours later with a knot the size of a golf ball on the back of his head, and without his pants and wallet and car keys.